



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Establishment of a School of Veterinary Medicine:  
University of Ulster

9 April 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Establishment of a School of Veterinary Medicine: University of Ulster

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Professor Richard Barnett	University of Ulster
Professor John Callan	University of Ulster
Professor Carol Curran	University of Ulster

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Professor Richard Barnett, the vice chancellor of the University of Ulster (UU); Professor Carol Curran, the dean of the faculty of life and health sciences; and Professor John Callan, the Norbrook chair in pharmaceutical science at the University of Ulster.

**Professor Richard Barnett (University of Ulster):** Thank you for your welcome and for inviting us to make this presentation and discuss this important issue with you today. I will say three things by way of introduction, and I will then hand over to John Callan, who holds the Norbrook professorship in pharmaceutical sciences, who will make the presentation.

You are all well aware that the University of Ulster exists for a very simple reason: to work in partnership to promote the economic, social and cultural development of this region. A key component of the economy is the agrifood industry. It is our largest industry and is identified for its importance and its potential growth in the Programme for Government and in the economic strategy. You spoke about skills earlier, and a key skill in supporting that industry is veterinary medicine, yet, in this region, we have no training of vets. Clearly, the vets whom we would train would be qualified for all sectors, but the focus of our vet school would be on animal health and welfare. It would be about supporting the agrifood industry and would not focus on domestic animals. The vets whom we would train would and could work in that sector, but vet schools specialise in different areas. We would focus on animal health and welfare to support the efficiency and effectiveness of the industry here.

We are looking at the issue because we were approached by the industry to do so, so we are responding to the industry. When we were asked to do that, we consulted more widely. We have support not only from the industry but from the veterinary bodies. We have support from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for this, and we have support from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise

(CAFRE), because we would offer training in partnership with the college. So we have widespread support for the initiative.

Finally, a key part of the University of Ulster's mission is to provide socially inclusive higher education and access to the professions for people from all sections of society. If you were to look at the people from this region who are able to train as vets, you would say that, basically, it is a rich person's club. Very few people from working-class backgrounds can avail themselves of the opportunity to train as a vet because of the sheer cost of needing to go elsewhere, so there is also that aspect of accessibility to the profession. The establishment of a school of veterinary medicine would support a key industry. There is a key skills gap with vets, and it would also provide opportunities in an inclusive way. In summary, that is what it is about. John will put more flesh on those bones.

**Professor John Callan (University of Ulster):** Thank you, vice chancellor. I also thank the Committee for the opportunity to brief you on our plans for a new school of veterinary medicine. The vice chancellor has illustrated our motivation behind establishing a school of veterinary medicine in Northern Ireland, responding to the needs of local industry, to try to make the veterinary profession a career choice that more students in Northern Ireland can follow, to improve the R&D capacity in veterinary science in the North and to increase the competitiveness of the sector internationally. The main driver for us is the strength of the agrifood industry in Northern Ireland. It is the largest industry here and is valued at £5 billion per annum. It has also proven to be a very robust industry and has continued to grow throughout the economic recession. That has been recognised by the Executive in their Programme for Government and also in the economic development strategy, in which they have identified the agrifood sector as one of five target areas for future growth. Indeed, the Agri-Food Strategy Board's Going For Growth strategy plans to increase the size of the industry further by 40% to £7 billion by 2020. Associated with that planned increase will be a rise in jobs from 100,000 to around 115,000. There is also an expected increase in livestock numbers of around 65% by 2020. That is a significant increase in livestock numbers from where we are at present, and it will require an investment in education and training of the personnel associated with handling those livestock and their produce.

The veterinary profession plays a critical role in this in areas such as livestock husbandry, herd health, disease control and public health. With such a planned increase in livestock numbers, it is obvious that there will also be a requirement for an increased number of vets to help to support that. Very conservative estimates, from our calculations, project that, by 2020, we will need approximately a 25% increase in the number of vets per annum in the Province.

We would not be sitting here if there was a school of veterinary medicine in Northern Ireland. Students are forced to leave the Province and must go to England, Scotland, Dublin, which has the only school of veterinary medicine on the island of Ireland, or to universities in the EU, which is becoming more common. Obviously, for Northern Ireland students, that results in significantly higher costs, through increased fees, subsistence, travel et cetera, compared with the costs of doing a comparable degree such as medicine in Northern Ireland.

In addition to the high costs, there is also a lot of competition for places. At the new school of veterinary medicine that is opening in Surrey in September, there are over 740 applications for just 45 places available on the first year of the course. In Edinburgh, there is a similar situation, with 1,000 applications for just over 70 funded places. There is evidence that Northern Ireland students struggle to gain access to courses in Scotland and England.

Approximately 50 students a year from Northern Ireland leave the Province to study veterinary medicine. About 30 of those go to either England or Scotland, between eight and 10 go to the Republic of Ireland, and between 12 and 15 go to the EU. It is interesting to note that there are 11 universities in the EU that teach veterinary degrees through the medium of English, yet there are only seven in the UK. As I mentioned, the cost for our students to access veterinary education in GB is in the region of £100,000 for a five-year degree. That is money that is being spent outside the Province that could be spent here.

A Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) report on the vets who graduated in the past three years found that 98% came from the more affluent socio-economic groups. Those groups make up 48% of the Northern Ireland population, so there is evidence that the status quo prohibits students from less-advantaged backgrounds from accessing veterinary medicine.

Our proposal is to establish a school of veterinary medicine at the University of Ulster. That will allow us to control the supply of suitably trained vets, help to support the local agrifood sector and improve

access for many more Northern Ireland students who would like to pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

The term "suitably trained" is important, because the Northern Ireland economy is strongly agrifood-related. Over 60% of vets who work in Northern Ireland work in the agrifood sector. In GB, the corresponding figure is 20%. Given that there is such a low emphasis on agrifood in GB, it is no surprise that the quality of training in livestock husbandry in colleges in GB has been seen as lacking.

Another important aspect of establishing a veterinary school at the University of Ulster will be the improved research and development opportunities that will come with it. Going for Growth states that Northern Ireland is significantly behind top performers such as the US, Sweden, Finland and the Republic of Ireland in R&D investment in agrifood. A new veterinary school would certainly increase the amount of R&D capacity that has been aligned with the agrifood industry.

The majority of vets who practise in Northern Ireland must leave the Province for their continuous professional development (CPD). There are limited CPD opportunities available in Northern Ireland, and the chief vet has recognised the importance of a new veterinary school here, which will help to drive up standards in the profession in general through an increase in CPD. When we did our preliminary work on how best to deliver veterinary education in Northern Ireland, we considered many options. Where would we locate the proposed veterinary school, and what curriculum model would we use? When I say "curriculum model", I mean in the broadest sense whether we would operate a high-end referral hospital on our own campus or, which is becoming increasingly common and has been adopted by Nottingham and the new school in Surrey, distribute clinical teaching through partner practices, known as clinical associates, throughout Northern Ireland. Therefore, there are two main models: one where you do the majority of your clinical teaching on site in a referral hospital, and one where we you go off site and identify partner practices throughout the Province.

We also looked at the numbers that would be required to meet demand, and the minimum number that we could operate with and still be commercially viable. We did the analysis, and our Coleraine campus emerged as the preferred location, for several reasons. We have a lot of available infrastructure there for teaching and learning, such as laboratories and equipment. We also have a lot of synergies both in teaching and research. For example, we have a lot of courses in the area of pharmaceutical science, pharmacy, biomedical science and nutrition, which can provide synergies in teaching with the proposed veterinary medicine programme. In addition, we have a lot of R&D expertise there in areas that are synergistic with veterinary medicine, such as drug delivery, microbiology, human nutrition etc.

As I said, once we did the analysis, the Coleraine campus emerged as the preferred location. Next, we looked at the curriculum model that would be best suited to deliver the programme. Veterinary medicine is normally a five-year degree. The final year is almost entirely clinical, during which the students enter into a rotation cycle, very much like in medicine. Students do rotations in various disciplines of clinical teaching, such as small animal medicine, small animal surgery, large animal medicine, equine medicine, and exotic animal medicine etc. There are two approaches to service that clinical teaching. One is where there is a referral hospital on site, where the students enter rotations in the different disciplines throughout their final year. The second option is, as I mentioned, a distributed model where, instead of having a referral hospital on site, teaching is distributed among identified partner organisations throughout the Province, both private and government.

After analysis, the distributed model emerged as the preferred option for several reasons. First, it is very costly to build and operate a referral hospital. Depending on the location of the referral hospital, and, in Northern Ireland in general, it would be very difficult to achieve adequate caseloads for students to get a good level of clinical teaching. Also, a referral hospital would work in direct competition with the private veterinary practices in Northern Ireland. We are keen to work with the profession and not alienate it when delivering this new programme.

To test the feasibility of the distributed model, it was important that we got the support of the partners that we would need to take it forward. We have had initial discussions with various providers, and the main ones are CAFRE, which the vice-chancellor mentioned, in the areas of livestock husbandry, animal husbandry etc, and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in the area of post-mortem pathology, as well as numerous second-opinion practices and referral practices throughout the Province. Also, there is Tullyraine Equine Practice for equine medicine. We have also had discussions with referral hospitals and other private practices and farm animal practices.

As the vice chancellor mentioned, we also have support from the Agriculture Minister and very strong support from the Chief Veterinary Officer. They see the proposed veterinary programme as supporting the Going for Growth strategy and helping to drive up standards in the profession. There has been very strong support from DARD.

In identifying the type of numbers that we would require, we have estimated that, by 2020, if Going for Growth is implemented, Northern Ireland will require in the region of 60 to 65 vets per annum. We anticipate that our current starting point will be 50 and that we will then react to see whether there is a requirement for more. Higher Education Funding Council for England guidance indicates veterinary degrees as band A, the highest banding, for all five years of the programme. That is currently valued at £15,643 per annum per full-time equivalent (FTE) student. Therefore, that would result in an annual commitment from DEL of £782,150 for the 50 FTEs per annum, which is just under £4 million if the full five years were in operation.

I will give you an indication of where we are currently. We were requested by DEL to submit a full green book economic appraisal. We did that before Christmas and got initial feedback, which we have responded to. We are now in a position to submit the document, probably today or, if not today, tomorrow, back to DEL. We will await its response.

In summary, it is difficult to see how, from an economic point of view, Going for Growth can be delivered if there is no investment in the training of vets in Northern Ireland, particularly vets with a strong focus on food-producing animals. Again, the sector will benefit significantly from the increased R&D activity and innovation associated with a new school of veterinary medicine. Thank you for this opportunity, and, obviously, we are happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, John.

**Professor Barnett:** Carol has been leading in our discussions. As John mentioned, this would be a partnership with CAFRE. It is a distributed model, and that brings the cost down substantially. To establish an old-fashioned vet school where the university seeks to do it all and has a vet farm on site would be very costly, so this would involve working with the vets. Working with the veterinary practices also helps to enhance the quality there, because those vets would be part-time staff for us while working as vets. There is an interaction continuously with a large number of vets. Carol, do you want to say anything on CAFRE? John Fay and his team at CAFRE are enthusiastic supporters of what we are doing, as is AFBI.

**Professor Carol Curran (University of Ulster):** We have met several times, obviously, to discuss this with CAFRE, and we have other areas of provision where we already collaborate with it. We are very familiar with it as an organisation. On the referral hospital side, we did explore all the models, irrespective of whether it was going to be more costly. When we drilled down into that, we found that some of the providers on the UK mainland who have referral hospitals are not without their difficulties because, in fact, by the time animals are presented at that referral hospital, the assessment has already been made. It is those assessments that the students need to achieve by their first-day competence, so we believe that the preferred model is more fit for purpose. As the vice chancellor said, CAFRE is very keen to partner with us on this, and it fits very well with a lot of things that it is already undertaking.

**The Chairperson:** Folks, you have made a very strong and well-put case. I am happy enough to support it, but why has it not been proposed before now? Why has no one else picked it up in your opinion?

**Professor Barnett:** I am not sure. I cannot say what our predecessors did all those years ago. I can say that we work closely and have partnerships with industry. It was the industry that came to us, and, clearly, it sees a skills shortage here at the moment. As John said, I think that there is a public perception that people who go into veterinary medicine then perhaps act as the high street vet. That is the minority and is not the focus of what we are talking about. Most vets are working with food producers, so we are talking about the animal health and welfare side out of it — large animal veterinary practice. I suppose the other thing is that, with the sheer growth in the importance of the quality of food products and the growth of that sector, the shortage is being highlighted. That key growth sector will be held back by a skills shortage.

**Professor Callan:** In addition, VetNI has been lobbying quite hard for a number of years to try to get some support, not necessarily for a veterinary school in Northern Ireland but for students from

Northern Ireland who are pursuing a career in veterinary medicine in GB. It has certainly been on the agenda of the profession here for quite a long time, and I think that we are reacting now to the real need. In particular, as I said, if Going for Growth is to be implemented, there will be a significant increase in livestock numbers in the Province that will have to be managed. Vets play a key role in that.

**The Chairperson:** How will your engagement with CAFRE on its veterinary nursing courses supplement what you are doing? Is there any crossover there?

**Professor Curran:** Yes, we have had discussions on that. It is something that we would very much like to bring in alongside this proposal. We have talked to CAFRE about it, and we think that it would add further strength to what we are seeking to achieve.

**The Chairperson:** You touched on continuous professional development. What is the demand for veterinary CPD? Is it regulatory, mandatory, or is it optional?

**Professor Callan:** Vets have to do a certain amount of CPD to keep their registration, as is the case in many professional bodies. Some of it can be done online remotely but, depending on the certificates or qualifications that they want to get, a lot of them have to travel to the schools of veterinary medicine in GB to accomplish that. That is an increased cost, and there is downtime in doing that, which we could perhaps deal with through a new school of veterinary medicine.

**Professor Curran:** In the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences, we have very many professions already represented. We are very familiar with the CPD model and the various requirements, and we feel very well placed to meet that demand.

**The Chairperson:** You have a built-in market there. Finally, you have a green book appraisal away to the Department. What are your feelings? Is it supportive? Do you want to comment on that at this stage?

**Professor Barnett:** We submitted a first draft of the green book appraisal way back before Christmas, and it came back in January.

**Professor Curran:** Yes. The comments that came back were quite low level.

**Professor Barnett:** They were not fundamental to what we were saying.

**Professor Curran:** They were really just seeking clarification on a number of areas.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks very much for the presentation. You mentioned the agrifood sector and livestock, and you want to set up a veterinary medicine school. Excuse my ignorance, but I have two cats and I take my cats to a vet, would it include services like that as well?

**Professor Callan:** It would include everything. They would be trained in all aspects of veterinary medicine, but the focus from a teaching and research point of view would be on the food-producing animal.

**Professor Barnett:** To qualify, they have to have what is known as first-day competence. That is how the outputs are judged. Therefore, they would be competent to work in any sector. However, as John said, the focus of a lot of schools elsewhere is on the domestic animal side. So, although they are qualified to work on large animals, that is not where their specialism has been. The industry is pointing to the relative weakness there, whereas ours would be very much focused on the large animal side, although they would be competent to go into the domestic side.

**Mr Douglas:** It is a big growth area as well. Think of the number of people who now have household pets. I was at an event yesterday run by Cats Protection. If you had asked me five years ago if I would go to something like that, I would not have thought of it, yet I now have two cats. It was interesting to see other MLAs there.

John, you mentioned that 98% of people who graduate are from the most affluent areas. We are keen on targeting that 2% who are from disadvantaged areas. How do you propose to improve access for them?

**Professor Barnett:** If there were opportunities here, it would improve access. At the moment, they have to go elsewhere and the fees are £9,000 a year, but they would be £3,500 here. The fact that it is local would improve access. The other thing that the university does — this costs us places in league tables, but we are not focused on those — is that we focus on servicing the community here. We do not admit simply by A level results. If we did, we could shift the A levels up and move up the league tables. I know that some people would like us to do that, but that would be detrimental to widening access.

Like the allied health professions, we could ask for at least three As and admit on that basis, but we do not; we ask for three Bs. That costs us places in league tables. I think that is better because we assess on their fitness to work in a caring profession. They do an aptitude test for a caring profession and, subject to passing that and being in the top range, they can come in with lower, although still good, A levels. Other universities are fixated with league tables, and we could ask for higher grades in a similar way. In veterinary medicine, I envisage us admitting not just by A levels but by way of a competency test whereby people can demonstrate that they have a competency and an interest in the sector. That is what we do across the piece as far as possible. In nursing, we admit by interviews and not simply by A levels. There may be members of the Committee who want us to go up the league tables. We could do that by not doing what we do and admit simply by A level results. However, we would be disadvantaging people from many of your communities if we did that.

**Mr Douglas:** Our Programme for Government is very much about creating employment but also about targeting specific areas of need. Could you legally set a quota or a percentage for the number of students you could take from disadvantaged areas?

**Professor Barnett:** Yes. We have not done it in the past. It was mooted some time ago, and some universities in England do it. It is based on looking at a person's socio-economic background. The University of Bristol based it on the average A level performance in a school; if a person goes to a relatively poorly performing school, that person gets a slightly lower offer than someone who goes to a higher performing school. We could look at that but we have not done it. There was quite a bit of opposition from your party when it was mooted that that might be done.

**Mr Douglas:** I was not in the party at that time, but I am a big supporter of that, as the First Minister would be.

**Professor Curran:** We look very closely at the backgrounds from which our students are drawn. We examine that data and, sometimes, we target our recruitment drives to those areas where we know we find it difficult to draw students from. Therefore, we sort of do it the other way round: we try to be proactive in particular areas in Northern Ireland where we find it difficult to recruit students.

**Mr Douglas:** You mentioned the green book economic appraisal. I have been involved in some of those appraisals when over 100 questions have come back, but that is another story. What are the options in the green book appraisal at this stage, apart from the option that you have outlined here, John?

**Professor Barnett:** Well, this was the preferred option.

**Mr Douglas:** It was the preferred option?

**Professor Barnett:** We looked at the different campuses but, clearly, we have to look at the synergy with the subjects. The benefit of the Coleraine campus, as John said, is that the life sciences are there. Another option, early on, was to have an old-fashioned vet school where we do everything, but that is not the way we work. This is the preferred option. From a larger point of view, you could do a full cost-benefit analysis, which the Assembly might be interested in. We have a key growth sector here in which there is a key skills shortage; what is the impact of that on the economy and on achieving your targets if you do not close that skills gap?

**Professor Curran:** We put forward different models for the student number, but what we have presented to you today is what we consider to be the minimum student number.

**Mr Douglas:** Thank you. The presentation was excellent and very clear. Well done, John.

**Mr Buchanan:** I, too, commend you on the presentation, which was very well put. You said that you had the support of the Agriculture Minister. I have no doubt that, apart from the green book appraisal, you would have had some sort of discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning or with DEL officials. How did you find them in supporting this proposal?

**Professor Barnett:** I would say they have been pretty agnostic. They are saying that, if there are extra student numbers, it is for us to allocate those student numbers. The thing is, Tom, that they are band A student numbers, which are the expensive ones, because veterinary science is similar to medicine. That means that there are additional costs, so they are looking at it simply from that point of view. It is fair to say that they have not expressed a view on whether we should be going for veterinary medicine, other than we should we make the case and they will look at it. They have been pretty neutral.

**Professor Callan:** This is the first time we have been asked for a full green book appraisal for student numbers. Those are normally for capital projects.

**Mr Buchanan:** If you were to get the green light, how long would it take you to get it up and running at the university?

**Professor Callan:** Obviously, there is a time constraint. Student advertising has to be in the prospectus about 16 months before we plan to take our first intake. For example, we would need to be advertising very soon to make the September 2015 intake. There are significant time constraints with this. The later we get confirmation that the places will be available, the later we can offer this. If we were to go past the 18 months prior to our planned intake by a month, it could delay it by a year. Therefore, in my opinion, it is imperative that we get a decision as soon as we possibly can.

**Professor Curran:** The programme would be offered through UCAS, and there is a certain timetable for that, so that is our biggest constraint.

**Mr Hilditch:** My questions on accessibility and the start date have been answered, and I have no animals. Other than asking whether there was anything in it for the Jordanstown campus, that is about it. *[Laughter.]*

**Professor Barnett:** There is something in it for east Antrim vets, though.

**Professor Callan:** Yes. We have had discussions with a lot of key practices that we see as critical in being able to deliver the distributed model, and they will be dispersed in many different constituencies throughout the Province. We will be engaging with the profession in different regions throughout Northern Ireland.

**Ms McGahan:** I have nothing to add except to say that I support what you are doing. I come from the farming community, and I know that the Food Standards Agency is involved in carrying out on-farm inspections; therefore, it would be useful to have engagement with it regarding all of that. I also see a gap with regard to animal cruelty. In my area, there was a big issue in Clogher Valley of horse cruelty, where people who came out to view those animals were not vets. I see a big gap there, and we have raised the issue of people who do not have the required training with the Minister. That is something for you to consider.

**Professor Callan:** A lot of the vets who work with DARD work in the area of food. That is definitely something that we will engage in; we will contact the Food Standards Agency.

**Mr F McCann:** I have one point, probably similar to Sammy's. The agrifood industry and farming are so important to the North. I live in a fairly built-up constituency but, believe it or not, 30% of the constituency is rural. It is often forgotten that there are quite a number of constituencies that may look built-up but have a rural element. It is logical to go in the direction that you are going.

**The Chairperson:** Richard, John and Carol, thank you very much for your time. I think that you can gather from the Committee's response that there is support here for your endeavours. We will ask the Department to keep us up to date with its deliberations. Thank you.